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# **Food Poverty and urban struggles during COVID-19: the social reproduction of unequal London and the false narrative about the ‘pandemic-led crisis’**

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## **Abstract**

This paper analyses the crisis of social reproduction through the dynamics of urban food provision in times of COVID-19. The rise of food poverty due to austerity policies resulted in an upsurge of political mobilisation and mushrooming of local coping strategies to support the social reproduction of cities. In this allegedly pandemic-led crisis the responsibility to compensate for the lack of care services, food and wages among vulnerable groups has become increasingly individualised because “austerity involves a territorial reworking of the state through which forms of care, social reproduction and intervention are increasingly sourced from communities themselves” (Strong, 2020; p.212). Through semi-structured interviews with civil society organizations and charities, ethnographic research with local food groups and food banks in North-East London and analysis of secondary material, this paper firstly explores *how* local food solidarity initiatives organise and mobilise people, manage commodities and urban space to tackle food poverty in North-East London during the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, by using the concept of localised resistance to the corporate-led food system, this paper explores the inter-scalar tensions between the state-level and localised food solidarity initiatives to highlight the inadequacy of the current food system in tackling urban food insecurity. Through a social reproduction framework, the paper shows that the state-led food strategies, based on short-term, scattered, top-down and under-funded initiatives have been both the cause and consequence of the current food poverty crisis. Ultimately, the article proposes to reverse the order of causation: rather than claiming that COVID-19 has created a food crisis, we claim that COVID-19 has only shed light on pre-existing contradictions in the provision of food in urban areas. The crisis has for long been contrasted by local strategies of solidarity, often in contraposition with both market and state.

## **Acknowledgements:**

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## 1. Introduction

The 2007-2009 global financial crisis and ensuing fiscal austerity resulted in an upsurge of practices of resistance and solidarity in order to cope with the crisis of social reproduction across many cities in the Global North. Examples of these strategies include the multiplication of food solidarity initiatives to meet the increasing demand posed by UK food insecurity. Problems linked to malnutrition and undernutrition have been reported in many national media. For instance, a piece published by The Independent in July 2020<sup>4</sup> reported that in 6 months alone, approximately 2,500 children younger than 16 years had been admitted to UK hospitals for malnutrition. Yet, the increase in demand for emergency food provision from food banks and rise in the number of patients presenting with malnutrition in hospitals in the UK have revealed the existence of food insecurity within the country (Prayogo et al., 2019). As a result of decades of neoliberal policies and austerity, and more recently because of the massive unemployment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, people struggle even more to afford a healthy diet for them and their families. The figures are stark. According to a Sustain's (2020) report, while "1.9 million Londoners regularly struggled to afford or access food before the Covid-19 pandemic, over 500,000 food parcels across London have been delivered, as a result of the increased demand".

Figures on the current food crisis are being updated at a rapid pace, and academic research has not yet managed to fully understand its implications. Also, there is very low understanding of the struggles that local institutions and community-based organizations faced to cope with food crises. This paper considers food (access and distribution) as a constituent element of the social reproduction of life. Social reproduction is a broad term which describes the public and private domain where lives are maintained<sup>5</sup>. By making explicit the state- and market-led institutional conditions through which food security is denied, we outline the crisis of social reproduction in London, England.

By bridging the literature on social reproduction and political economy of institutions, and by collecting a series of semi-structured interviews and ethnographic research, this paper highlights the different reasons why food insecurity among urban marginal communities should not be analysed as an ad-hoc, unpredictable and contingent phenomena, but rather linked to structural determinants such as deflationary policy on wages (which define household

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/food-poverty-hunger-child-malnutrition-hospital-layla-moran-coronavirus-a9615161.html>

<sup>5</sup> Zechner, M., and Hansen, B. R. Building power in a crisis of social reproduction. *ROAR Magazine*, (2015). 132-51. Available at <https://roarmag.org/magazine/building-power-crisis-social-reproduction/>. Accessed 5 December 2020

and individual purchasing power), restrictive regulatory system on physical spaces, and lack of fair access to resources and institutional knowledge on how to navigate the 'system' to enable food provision for all. By doing so, the paper highlights how grassroots and local initiatives have worked, organised and mobilised communities, resources and space outside the market to face the crisis for social reproduction created by the market. This translates in operating through a politics of *proximity* to counter market and state forces and organise the spatial provision of food. Highlighting that this is not a pandemic-led crisis, such initiatives indeed compensate for disinvestment in public provision of care pre-dated COVID-19 and operate under the recognition of food as a right.

This paper investigates the challenges and limitations of Volunteer and Community Services (VCS) working on food insecurity in North-East London during the COVID-19 pandemic. It looks at how such citizen-led actions, by being rooted in the 'politics of proximity' (Russell, 2019) and building on the 'urban everyday' (Beveridge and Koch, 2019), seeks to implement strategies of solidarity to compensate for the inadequacy of the welfare state in ensuring human rights such as food for the social reproduction of urban marginalities in London. In unpacking some of the limitations of such everyday practice of solidarity in the context of UK, we argue in favour of the need for a coordinated public policy on food and care provision to compensate for a scattered and underfunded system relying on volunteerism and individual good will.

More specifically, this working paper explores the following questions: How have local communities in North-East London responded to food crises and, in so doing, how successful have they been? How have such solidarity-based strategies been shaped by crisis conditions, i.e. economic, social, epidemiological and which challenges did they face? What are the market and state and institutional barriers that make food poverty, and therefore a crisis of social reproduction, so pervasive in London?

The first section of the paper discusses the concept of food insecurity in the UK context. Section 2 maps the status of food insecurity in the UK. Section 3 maps the everyday strategies of social reproduction, given the material limits and political struggles. Lastly, Section 4 concludes by exploring the inter-scalar tensions between state-level and localised food solidarity governance.

## **2. The status of food insecurity in London. Why are people food insecure and why do they end up using food banks?**

Food security has been defined as a situation in which “all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 2002). Embedded within the confines of the definition of food insecurity is ‘food poverty’, which undelight the material dimension of food insecurity, very often strictly related to lack of jobs, income (ibid)<sup>6</sup>. Although there is no one agreed-upon definition, the UK Department of Health defines ‘food poverty’ as “the inability to afford, or to have access to, food to make up a healthy diet” (Maslen et al., 2013; p.1). Food insecurity is indeed the most powerful symptom of the crisis of social reproduction, as it is the *sine qua non* condition to develop all the other aspects of individual and social reproduction linked to health, education and social justice.

The concept of food security has been often used to describe situations of undernutrition in low- and middle-income countries. However, over the past years, the media and policy makers have emphasised how populations in high-income countries such as the UK suffer serious hunger (The Guardian<sup>7</sup>, Sustain, 2020). The UK has seen a steady rise in household food insecurity in recent years, markedly since 2010 (Loopstra and Lalor, 2017). Data from the charity Sustain suggests that approximately 8.4 million people in the UK, including many households with working adults, families with children, older and disabled adults, and Black, Asian and Ethnic Minorities (BAME), face some form of food insecurity. One of the staggering statistics is on child poverty. Among children younger than 15 years in the UK, 20% do not have enough money to buy food and 19% are reported by UNICEF to be food insecure (UNICEF, 2017<sup>8</sup>). Furthermore, a 2017 report on a study on food insecurity commissioned by The Trussell Trust Food Bank Network, a charity and NGO, found that in the year prior to the survey, nearly 80% of over 400 households interviewed had skipped meals and gone without eating, sometimes for days at a time (Loopstra and Lalor, 2017; p. viii). Therefore, for many UK household food poverty is a long-standing issue that they had experienced monthly or almost monthly over the past years (Loopstra and Lalor, 2017). Tower Hamlets exemplifies very well inequality in London, as it is one of the poorest and richest boroughs of London and the UK. Within the same borough of Tower Hamlets, Canary Wharf, a major global financial centre, stands just meters away from the UK’s poorest households. In 2020 in Tower Hamlets

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<sup>6</sup> Some of the interviewees used household and individual food insecurity (food poverty) interchangeably.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/11/no-one-food-poverty-let-it-spread-brexit-pandemic-coronavirus>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/IWP\\_2017\\_09.pdf](https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/IWP_2017_09.pdf)

child poverty stood at approximately 57% and, with 31% of residents already over indebted compared to the national average of 17.6%. As such, Tower Hamlets clearly illustrates that the UK's existing food inequality problems are driven by neoliberal capitalism and further exacerbated by austerity following the financial crisis.

The factors driving increasing food insecurity in the UK are contentious (Loopstra and Lalor, 2017) but certainly pre-date COVID-19. Various authors have proposed that increasing household food poverty in the UK could be attributed to a myriad of socioeconomic factors, importantly, austerity and bureaucratic challenges in the benefit application and assessment system, income inequalities (from living costs outpacing household income growth), increased cost of many foods (particularly between 2007-2012) and income shocks (DEFRA, 2015; Mambie-Lumford and O'Connell, 2015; Loopstra and Lalor, 2017; Strong et al., 2020). Last but not least, the rise in refugees, asylum seekers and migrant and their destitution linked to the hostile immigration environment since 2012 (IPPR, 2020<sup>9</sup>). Loopstra and Lalor (2017), however, argue that while recent trends indicate that UK 'household poverty' has not risen, current levels of 'material deprivation' still restrict some households from sustainably meeting their basic needs for social reproduction, including food. These sentiments are rehearsed in a study by O'Connell et al. (2018) who demonstrated that although average UK household incomes have not changed much in recent years, the amount required to achieve a 'minimum diet for health and social participation' has escalated, in both real terms and as a fraction of overall household income (O'Connell et al., 2018). Indeed, there has been a significant reduction in the value of benefits since 2010, including tightening of access to disability benefits. For instance, people with mental health were no longer eligible to benefits while being unable to work or to find a job (Boardman, 2020). Yet, even those in employment have seen a decline in nominal wages as annual wage growth halved from 4% to 2% since the 2008 crisis<sup>10</sup> as well due to the flexibilization of working contracts. Therefore, it is largely agreed that the aforementioned factors have resulted in food becoming less affordable, especially for households on low, marginal or unsteady incomes (DEFRA, 2015; Mambie-Lumford and O'Connell, 2015; Loopstra and Lalor, 2017).

The factors leading households (and individuals) to turn to food banks for their food and dietary needs are complex and multifaceted (Mambie-Lumford and O'Connell, 2015; Prayogo et al., 2019;). On the one hand, Loopstra et al. (2019) and Perry et al. (2014) highlight that increase in food bank use is driven, primarily, by the growing demand for emergency help with food. To

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/access-denied>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/lessons-decade-failed-austerity?page=2>



this end, Prayogo et al. (2019) and Loopstra and Lalor (2017) propose that sudden, unfortunate life events, benefit delays or sanctions and financial strain provide fertile ground for such emergency food needs. Perry et al. (2014) and Prayogo et al. (2019)'s papers demonstrate this clearly by showing that most users referred to food bank in their studies spoke of immediate, pressing financial crises, which were compounded by a myriad overwhelming life circumstances; thereby increasing their susceptibility to life shocks like unemployment, illness, death, caring responsibilities and social support breakdown. To this end, Sosenko et al. (2019) in their UK State of Hunger Report, highlighted that 94% out of all 1,000 food bank users they interviewed were facing real destitution. Additionally, most food bank users had a household income that was on par with their housing costs, and therefore had on average, only just over £50 to spend per week (after housing costs) (Sosenko et al., 2019). They were also more likely to be unwell and to be facing long-term crises (Sosenko et al., 2019).

Personal and economic challenges imposed by the social service cuts heighten the severity of food poverty, therefore, it is unsurprising that those on the fringes of society are the ones most unlikely to meet the budgetary requirements for a "*standard, socially acceptable, healthy*" diet that allows for social participation (Loopstra and Lalor 2017; O'Connell et al. 2018; Prayogo et al., 2019). In their study among food bank users in the London Boroughs (Islington, Wandsworth and Lambeth) Prayogo et al. (2019) found that of all food bank users interviewed, nearly 60% were women, 65% were on benefits, more than half (52%) were classified as having low educational attainment and about 62% lived in social housing (local authority or housing association accommodation). Further to this, it has been reported that single parent households (with children) constituted the largest number of people receiving help from food banks, although single male households are also commonly seen in food banks (Loopstra and Lalor, 2017; Prayogo et al. 2019; Sosenko et al. 2019). To this end, approximately 1.4 million children under the age of 16 (11%) live in food insecure households; with almost 40% of food parcels distributed by the Trussell Trust's food banks going to children (Sosenko et al., 2019). However, while these aforementioned groups are well-represented in food banks, Sosenko and colleagues found that while being younger is in fact a risk factor for food poverty, young people are rarely seen at food banks, meaning that although many young people might actually need help meeting their dietary needs, they do not access help from food banks, but rather through school meals and youth centres, when available.

Therefore, determinants of food security are not only related to individual dietary behaviour but also involves a myriad of determinants -physical, social, political and economic- that affect which foods are eaten, thereby impacting short and long-term health and nutritional status

(Maslen et al., 2013). Following from that, food security has to be understood and investigated not only in quantity terms, but most of all in quality terms. Food security not only encompasses relieving immediate hunger and the amount of food required to meet this end but endures a diversified range of culturally appropriate micro and macro nutrients which require a functional national food system which was showing serious deficiencies prior to the pandemic.

More recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has further put a strain over the food insecurity of the country, highlighting the limitations of the economy in ensuring an affordable, available, and nutritious food for all. Across the country, food banks and many forms of informal food solidarity have started to cope with a massive rise in demand which, according to news reporting, saw demand soar up to 325%<sup>11</sup>. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Gore in a 2020 article<sup>12</sup> highlighted that the racial, gender and class divide in as far as inequality and poor health outcomes are concerned, the key drivers being poverty, food insecurity, unemployment, less-than-ideal housing and limited access to healthcare. These are just few of the elements that makes food insecurity in the UK a 'public scandal' during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, as much as the 'public health' crisis.

Several studies carried out by the National Food strategy and University of Northumbria have indicated that, because parents are 'cutting corners', children are eating more junk food and snacks and less fresh fruits and vegetables (FFV), and following school closure they are likely to skip at least one meal per day (BMJ, 2020)<sup>13</sup>. Quoted from Sky news article published on the 16th of December "In May, a YouGov poll commissioned by the charity Food Foundation found that 2.4 million children (17%) were living in food insecure households and by October it said an extra 900,000 children had been registered for free school meals"<sup>14</sup>. The situation is so dramatic that UNICEF has intervened to support South London administration to supply breakfast boxes over the two-week Christmas school holidays. Such patterns of malnutrition lead to long-term negative repercussions in terms of health and school performances. Similar stories are reported among adults in furlough or in already very fragile economic conditions.

It is in light of this reality that a political economy analysis of urban food insecurity crisis will be useful to understand what public institutions have done (and not done) to avoid the crisis of social reproduction through food policy. Food, being a prerequisite of life, exemplifies and

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<sup>11</sup> Mirror (May 2020) <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/uk-food-banks-see-demand-22088998>

<sup>12</sup> <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/2020/05/01/covid-19-and-racial-capitalism-in-the-uk-why-race-and-class-matter-for-understanding-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>

<sup>13</sup> BMJ 2020;370:m3193 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m3193>

<sup>14</sup> <https://news.sky.com/story/covid-19-for-the-first-time-in-its-history-unicef-will-help-feed-kids-in-the-uk-12163515>

represents the core material conditions of social reproduction and therefore it is essential to analyse how local organisations, institutions, market agents are organised to contain or enable food crisis. This analysis then investigates how grassroot and community-based initiatives have worked, organised, mobilised in terms of people, resources and space. This has been carried out by drawing on lived experiences collected through 12 semi-structured interviews and ethnographic research in local charities and organisations in the borough of Haringay, Hackney and Tower Hamlets, and in online bimonthly online meetings of the Food London Boroughs Group organised by Greater London Authority, during which local boroughs report on voucher system, food distribution and local initiatives to cope with food poverty in London. We kept the interviewees anonymous. In addition, this work draws from a series of secondary data from news, reports and public websites. We have assessed the complexities of food-solidarity operations and what has changed (and not changed) in their social, political and regulatory context as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Through the stories collected in a number of food solidarity organisations in North-East London, the next section maps the everyday local strategies for social reproduction, unveiling the material barriers and political struggles of the local organisations operating in their community to tackle food poverty. Along the lines, we will also capture how the demography (i.e. gender, race, age and class) and barriers of the beneficiaries has changed as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

### **3. Mapping the challenges of everyday solidarity: how VCSs organise, mobilise people, resources and venues to tackle food poverty in London**

Food solidarity initiatives are one of several ways through which food insecurity is contested during stressed times. In high-income countries, food banks address food insecurity by providing emergency food. Food banks are 'charitable initiatives providing parcels of emergency food for people to take away, prepare and eat' and over the past decades were increasingly becoming an integral part of community life (Mambie-Lumford and O'Connell, 2015; Loopstra et al., 2019). Until 2010, when local authority budget cuts and changes in welfare entitlements and benefits spurred the sporadic growth of The Trussell Trust Food bank Network, food banks were relatively uncommon in the UK (Loopstra et al., 2019). This recent rise in food banks has heightened awareness and underscored the issue of food insecurity in the UK, initiating an ongoing contentious discussion on the subject, among both the public and within higher echelons of government and policy (Mambie-Lumford and O'Connell, 2015). While it is largely agreed that increasing engagement with food banks by the public is indicative of the magnitude of UK food insecurity (Prayogo et al., 2019), it is important to stress that this number might be an underestimation. This is, in part because, some food insecure households (and individuals) cannot access food banks and not all food banks maintain

updated, routine, data on their beneficiaries. This means that food insecurity estimates gleaned from food bank use are at best only a proxy of the true extent of UK food poverty (Lambie-Mumford and Dower, 2014).

According to the Trussell Trust Food bank Network, the largest network of food banks in the UK, various organisations, including local council, children's centres, housing associations and other social care workers, identify people in need of emergency food provisions and issue them with a food bank voucher. At the nearest food bank, the beneficiaries exchange the food vouchers for food parcels, which contain various food items curated to meet their dietary needs for a specified period of time, usually a few days. Vouchers that can be used at supermarket however do not ensure that people will buy healthy food such as FFVs. In many food hubs people can just self-refer, with no limits and no criteria to access the food. Most food banks beneficiaries usually access food banks through a referral system, although some do not. Referral and eligibility criteria can be strict. In her 2017, publication, Mambie-Lumford highlighted that while an important means of securing food security, the current operational mechanisms employed by food banks could in fact hinder potential users from accessing and using these food provisioning services. The author points to the referral system, particularly the fact that eligibility for access to some food-banks is determined by gatekeepers, which might limit some users; restrictions on how often people can be referred within a given period (e.g. no more than three times in 6 months); and restrictions in operating hours (Lambie-Mumford, 2017). Findings from our fieldwork, indicate that the situation is mixed. Whereas in some organisations the system is based on self-referral, some have to screen the beneficiaries. Evidence from food banks in East London have highlighted similar sentiments regarding the operationalisation of food banks. An Interviewee managing a food bank in Tower Hamlets confirmed that:

*“So, they can definitely come to us and we have an assessment. Most of our referrals will come from external bodies like public health, for example, they will come from the council, social services or what we call social prescribers...from the GPS. So different people will send them across and even then, when they do send them across, we still have to do an assessment to make sure that they are eligible because if everyone that is referred is given the service, then we can't sustain it. So, you have to really think about needs.”*

However, the need to 'select' and identify as eligible only the beneficiaries in the worst situation is indicative of the limited resources that the food banks rely on. In other words, there is austerity within the crisis which illustrates the limits to voluntary provision in the absence of social welfare. The referral system is therefore very inconsistent and confusing, and as one

interviewee stated that *“it is almost conceived to put people off because is demoralising and unkind”*. The only way to avoid that is get rid of eligibility criteria. Yet, the food available is limited, which reinforces even more the need to have stable jobs and decent wages.

With Covid-19, councils across London set up food hubs near Estates to offer foods to hundreds of people. Although many admit that insecure work, poor pay and a dysfunctional welfare state are the core structural causes of food poverty, since COVID-19 demand has increased 10 times because a lot of people lost their job. One interviewee from a charity in Harringay said *“before Covid-19 it was malnutrition with the homeless and adults, now the vulnerable are households, and summer holiday...the £15 voucher are not always spent on food, but rather on cigarettes and beers”*. This statement said by a volunteer suggests that often charities and VCS internalise the long-standing governmental neoliberal narrative based on the individualisation of responsibilities.

Edible London, a local organization based in Harringay during COVID-19 went from providing 200 meals a week to 50,000 meals, in cooperation through partners with community kitchens, which made hot meals. In total, 500,000 meals were issued till July 2020: 180,000 with the council to local vulnerable, 35,000 hot meals distributed, 320,000 from food distribution. 130 tonnes of surplus food have been utilised and passed onto beneficiaries. It can happen that *“some weeks we have loads, and then over the last couple of weeks we had less, which is a bit of a challenge”*. Based in the North East of London, (Hornbeam cafe) confirmed that the volatility of food donations is *“just crazy, one day you say: oh gosh I have to deliver to two food hubs tomorrow, what I am going to do and then miraculously there is food. But we have constant fear of not having enough food”*. The volatility of donations and food available is what makes charities and volunteer philanthropism often unsustainable.

Another issue that was mentioned across many organisations was the austerity and bureaucracy linked to the methods and volume of funding charities and organisations. The North London National Food Services got part of a £80,000 consortium granted to Hackney which was granted by DEFRA to be spent in 6 weeks, a feat described as *“a nightmare”*. As a result of this influx of emergency funds, and in order to satisfy the spending requirement, organizations expanded exponentially their reach, which then enabled a *“creation of dependency among the beneficiaries but then after the 6 weeks the funding stops and then you have to stop, which is heart-breaking”*. This statement again shows how sometime the Thatcherian narrative that depicts poor people as lazy, or unable to cope with rigid schedules, is still absorbed in the common language.

Another interviewee added that *“there are pots available, but you have to spend it within three months which is not sustainable”*. Furthermore, *“sometimes we got enough money to hire another staff member but is again short-term, so you have to juggle everything, strategy wise, plus doing the physical work, managing the finance, the grant applications etc<sup>15</sup>”*. She adds: *“the paperwork for National Lottery £5,000 or £10,000 grants or similar is very restrictive because you have to spend the money for something very specific, but things change, and you might need it for different reasons”*. Therefore, this system of support based on short-term financing and on volatility of food donations creates disruptions. Moreover, many organizations must write a weekly report to give information about how much food was distributed, which adds extra work to the organizations. One interviewee added *“food banks are mostly grant-funded initiatives, grants are drying up but again this is a problem that pre-dated COVID-19. Grant funding space has seen a constriction in terms of length and size of grants awarded, masked by the number of grants awarded. See the lottery say, we support 200 organisations, but now, instead of supporting 4 years cycle for £40,000, they support 1 year for £30,000”* which put an administrative burden on the charities because you have to apply more often to this kind of grants”. Charities are developing similarities with the private sector, and often have to perform and take strategic decisions according to a business model, and the competition is there. One interviewee from a food bank in Harringay remarked that *“they have commercialised charities; I have to spend months writing applications. We need to build the infrastructure and speaking the language of funding application”*. In order to offset the lack of funding, one of the interviewees from The North London National Food Service, confirmed that many organizations try to use crowdfunding, sometime managing to raise more than £10,000 *“which is used to buy dry goods and equipment and first-hand training for volunteers”* and in this sense offers more flexibility. It was noted that organizations run by the white middle-class are often able to attract funding through personal connections, which is not the case for organizations run by BAMEs, who often come from less affluent backgrounds. For example, an interviewee from Harringay said that: *“We only got £6000, we only have money to hire small team to run the Harringay operations of food procurement which were packing the bags”*. This system of crowdfunding, therefore, mirrors the structural and racial inequality on which society relies.

A further issue reported by many organisations was the lack of adequate venues where to cook, store and organise the operations. Hackney City Farm’s space, which was usually used for charity activities, was not working with the public because of the lockdown. Through the Council, they offered the space to Food Cycle and helped with the logistics involved in

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<sup>15</sup> At the time of interview, the CEO said she had had Covid-19 for seven weeks but she kept working

delivering food parcels. Many private businesses also offered their space to these initiatives until they were closed. A climbing centre in Hackney offered its space but then reopened so the volunteers moved to a Scouts organization that offered space, but they admitted that *“access to any space is super challenging”*. One volunteer from Hackney said that someone told them *“come do this amazing thing at our space and then they ask you £1100 per month for 8 hours of access a week in the kitchen and no access to storage space”*. So *“organisations have constantly to move and always find a new space”*. This arrangement is unsustainable, short-term and has structural constraints since they often operate in small places, without storage or kitchens. There is no systemic support to enable a sustainable food system, such as for instance storage and freezers, and yet one interviewee reported that *“we could have access to meat, but do not have freezers”*. Having a fixed space is important also because, then, food banks and food charities can deal with bigger volumes of food donations. This lack of venues has to be in a context of already-existing erosion of public or community spaces occurred over recent decades

However, the politics of local proximity, here understood as the effort to pull together local resources and people to cope with the food crisis, on which VCSs rely is a big (network) advantage. Although food insecurity is often addressed at household level, and less so at individual-level, empirical evidence from associations dealing with homelessness for instance *Akwaaba* show that many people live alone, in B&B or in their own rooms, and they are individually responsible for their own food supply. In this regard, the emotional labour of care performed by the volunteers is strictly intertwined with food donation. *“Old people do not hear the bells, do not answer the door. Because volunteers get to know the people, they deliver food to, they are able to know when to get worried. Also, asylum seekers, refugees, they hide, and they are scared to access these kinds of facilities, so trust needs to be built... people passes out, vulnerable and less mobile or learning difficulties”*, if there is no care attached to the ‘service’ (word used often by the manager of a charity in an interview, but which can be translated as the food solidarity initiatives), for a lot of people it is impossible to benefit. Edible London says *“because we are rooted in our community, we have been able to mobilise from 7 volunteers to 250 volunteers through Facebook, word of mouth, we have 350 people on the waiting list that are waiting to be accredited. 36 volunteers are just doing admin”*. Evidence from our fieldwork shows that local networks composed of community gardens, food banks, volunteers, local food market have created synergies and when COVID-19 happened, those who have those partnership have been able to galvanise forces more quickly, and been able to offer community support and be more resilient. Schools, even golf clubs, closed cafés, have been used almost like a public-private partnership. *“But again, questions remain whether this system is sustainable when furlough stops, and volunteers go back to work, and funds run*

out". Indeed, an important point to underscore is that this system of local solidarity relies on the free and scattered labour time offered by volunteers: many organisations in London rely on average more than 80 volunteers for the cycling, 60 volunteers for the food hub, 50 for the distribution, reaching over 200 in total in some organisations.. *"We need a location, we need people to manage volunteers, we have 7 employed staff and none of them are full-time"*. Indeed, volunteers are also recruited to organise volunteers *"The biggest struggle is logistics, you need people to pack the food, to deliver the food, and you need people to coordinate the volunteers and that is one of the main sticking point"*. Organisations have sophisticated systems of coordinating volunteers, there are WhatsApp groups, Google spreadsheets or apps such as 'Helping Hands'. They have screened volunteers, training them about EU General Data Protection Regulation, and train the trainers. At the same time, when the furlough has ended, these volunteers went back to their job, creating gaps in the help-chain. These issues prove that the VCS are structurally exposed to volatile flows of offers for occasional help which is determined by market-based (i.e. employment and unemployment) and state-based policies (furlough), which creates further organizational barriers to the sustainability of the food provision and deliveries. This relates also to the devaluation of care work and their dignification as specialised workers. Indeed, 'volunteering' often undermines the expertise and skills of organisations that demand decent wages for their workers

One striking issue is the need to provide not only food, but culturally appropriate food. White volunteers cook food that are not always well received by ethnic minorities. Many meals cooked and then refrigerated are vegan and vegetarian. One of the many organisations offering vegan food, admitted *"because we give vegan hot meals is not easy palatable for people used to Shepherd pie or spicy chicken curry"*. However, many foods donated are not nutritious, including the ones given by the local government council. One interviewee said *"terrible, disgusting, the food that were giving with the government parcel, if corona virus did not kill you, that would have. it was tea, milk, no fruits and vegetables"*. Business and shops gave surplus food in donations which would otherwise go in the bin. Most of the charities rely on this and it is clearly a 'leak' in the food corporate food system, which is sometimes junk food or ultra-processed food. Sustain (2020) reported that after Easter food charities received 25,000 Easter eggs, or in other occasions many banana cakes. Food donation risk being the dump of food corporations and retailers.





Caption: soft drinks donation in a food bank in East London

The scatteredness of the system, which relies on volatile resources, suggests the need for central coordination: indeed, local governments might have a role in convening, and providing leadership. The organisations themselves admitted that they would benefit of a (public) central coordinator that would put organizations in connection and facilitate resource sharing such as available volunteers, information, means for logistics, venues that can be used. In other words, create an economy of scale. The current system indeed does not automatically create a division of labour that would ensure the efficient use of resource. Instead, it creates a system where organizations compete among each other and become predatory for the smallest grant or the smallest space. Yet, there are also problem in the public local administration. According to various organizations, the Hackney council, similarly to many local authorities, does not communicate across departments because and very proactive departments are not in communications with the rest. A sustainable resilient food system needs also to involve people on the ground. Some organisations manage to find a seat at the Food strategy meetings of the councils, but they noted that the local council should avoid implementing policy without involving local food banks and community to understand what such VCS organisations needed but it is not always the case.

Indeed, while on the surface food banks are identified at as 'community-based services' that fill the gap in immediate food shortages by making available emergency food provisions, Perry's et al. (2014) propose that food banks are also political spaces within which beliefs and narratives, particularly around '*deservingness and dependency*', are framed, exchanged, negotiated, experienced and contested. In their study on food bank volunteers (Perry et al., 2014), the authors demonstrate that by being an avenue through which administrators, volunteers and food bank users of various cultural and political backgrounds interact,

sometimes on a fairly regular basis, ethical and political ideas, identities, attitudes and beliefs can either be forged or entrenched.

Finally, in addition to such institutional barriers, interviews unveiled that people struggle to access social food services due to language barriers, shame and institutionalised racism built around a hostile environment. This quote from an interview with a food bank manager in East London: “...so they [the borough local council] wanted to support the Somali community at that time. So, when we asked them [the beneficiaries] about food banks...we asked them ‘do you access food banks’ generally before we refer them to this one and they said no, and we asked him why. One said he was given things that weren’t Halaal and so he didn’t trust and so he was going to come back to the main street, one said that language is an issue in terms of trying to access and have that style of communication and then thirdly one said that I wasn’t even aware there was such a thing about food banks. Here we have people to speak Arabic, Somali, Pakistani, Bengali and obviously English and so it’s accessible because the people [at the food bank] represent you, because the people are welcoming with their language and communication and so on, which is really important”. Furthermore, “Right to food campaign” reported that people who have immigration condition ‘no recourse to public fund’ (NRPF) cannot access this service with massive discriminatory implications.

In other organisations interviewees admitted that many of the volunteers were white and financially stable, so they are not representative of the people are supporting, especially low income and people of colour. So many have identified as crucial the need to create a system that is participatory and involve more the voices of the local communities. Furthermore, this suggests that racial inequality also has a crucial role in understanding the more structural dynamics linked to the cause of food poverty. Racialised patterns of infection, severity of infection, and mortality in the UK confirm that minorities are disproportionately bearing the brunt of the pandemic. These factors contextualise the higher incidence of chronic medical conditions such as heart disease and diabetes among some BAME groups in the UK<sup>16</sup> (which in turn increases vulnerability to COVID-19). Health inequalities are further exacerbated by the material and psychological effects of racism. These dynamics mean that the uneven distribution and effects of COVID-19 cannot be explained by biomedical factors and these are cause and consequence of choices based on the political economy of austerity<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.bdct.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Race.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/2020/05/01/covid-19-and-racial-capitalism-in-the-uk-why-race-and-class-matter-for-understanding-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>

In conclusion, the crisis of social reproduction exposed by the food poverty in London is strictly related to the neoliberal austerity that pre-date COVID-19. Austerity has created a system that pushes people into destitution because they receive a living wage insufficient to reproduce themselves. COVID-19 impact people of colour and women much more seriously, and child poverty in East London boroughs was already above 40%, and this people are very often working poor. *“What we have seen now is the result of policy decisions not the result of covid-19”* and private organizations (charities) picking up the burden of supporting people in poverty. Someone added *“erosion of local authority budget, youth club services, school and problems are compounded by a lack of support. Food banks are a crisis-measures, and they won’t be able to tackle the symptoms, of all those inequalities”*. This gloomy picture clearly shows that the welfare system is inadequate and there is a lot that local authority can do. Although they do not have many resources and are ‘cash trapped’, local welfare assistance schemes are also an option through council tax reduction or emergency grants. Yet, eligibility criteria differ. Many studies and media have shown that the benefit system is not fit for purpose and benefits are not enough. The 5 weeks’ wait for the universal credit cause the cycle of poverty, as well the Victorian-Malthusian policy of two children cap to access benefits. Moreover, it has been highlighted in the interviews that voucher scheme has stigma attached to it and is basically transferring cash to the supermarkets and the big food corporations rather than reviving a healthy and sustainable local food production which would serve the need of the community by creating jobs and healthy food.

#### **4. Conclusions: Has the COVID pandemic unearthed the true extent of UK food insecurity? An inter-scalar institutional analysis of the ‘crisis’**

In this paper we tried to bring into the analysis three main challenges: First, the institutional-bureaucratic challenges of the VCS linked to persistent austerity. Second, the fallacy of corporate-led food system; and finally, the intersectional inequality. The combination of these factors has been the driver of the current crisis.

The pandemic caused state- and self-imposed isolation and shielding of various vulnerable groups which has resulted in sudden unemployment, curtailed working hours and reduced wages. As a result, the number of household and individuals facing food poverty has risen (Cipriani, 2020<sup>18</sup>; Power et al. 2020). To this end, in spring 2020 the demand for emergency food relief increased sharply, at least quadrupled. While food banks are now fairly well-

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<sup>18</sup> Cipriani, V. 2020. Charities warn Covid-19 will hit vulnerable as some foodbanks struggle for supplies. Civil Society News, 2020. <https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/charities-warn-coronavirus-will-hit-vulnerable-as-some-foodbanks-struggle-for-supplies.html>

established in the UK food system, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has exposed policy makers and the whole society to the fact that large sections of the UK population are either experiencing or are on the brink of food poverty (Power et al., 2020). Indeed, the pandemic has paradoxically exposed food insecurity to a false narrative of unprecedented health crisis which concealed the real reasons of why the food system has put social reproduction in crisis. Prior to the pandemic, individuals and households were already divided into 'the haves', i.e. those with adequate income, mobility and social support that enables them to access food through conventional channels (purchasing fresh or prepared produce from shops, cafes and restaurants), and the 'have-nots' i.e. those who do not have access to food and rely on food banks and donations (Loopstra et al., 2015; Lambie-Mumford, 2017). The pandemic has only served to expose and widen these inequalities further.

Therefore, when analysing food poverty, we need to connect the institutions, organizations, agents and dynamics around these vulnerabilities, and admit that the UK food crisis associated with the COVID19 pandemic occurred against a backdrop of already prevalent inequalities in food access across the UK (Power et al., 2020). For example, many low-income households, have been unable to store food because they are less financially secure and have therefore been able to purchase, on supermarkets, only the most expensive versions of products, making it impossible to purchase adequate food (Power et al., 2020), let alone healthy food that is socially and culturally acceptable. To this end, Huber argues that in the face of such pandemic, "people are not necessarily killed by the disease itself, but by the fact that they have limited access to the food that they need to live a healthy life". In this regard, food ceases to be a fundamental human right (Huber, 2020), but something that is denied to some sections of society. That is why future research could be linked to the critical nutrition studies (Perry and Sefton, 2015; Lambie-Mumford, 2017) to understand the link between food provision and food quality, especially in the development and use of standardised nutritional guidelines across institutions.

The pandemic has also had knock-on effects on the UK food charity system, which as highlighted in earlier sections of this paper, is a fundamental community-based response to the growing problem of food poverty. It has been reported by other studies that the COVID19 pandemic, and the lockdown resulting thereof, has fractured these food supply chains. Individual food donations dropped sharply due to households putting their own food supply needs first, due, in part, to fear of stock running out as people panic buy. Additionally, many food banks have faced challenges in acquiring non-perishable items required for standard food parcels, due to supermarkets rationing certain products and the poor availability of much

of this produce because of stockpiling<sup>19</sup>. Furthermore, Power et al. (2020) also highlighted that at the start of lockdown, the food volatility, coupled with rapidly increasing demand and reduced volunteer numbers, undermined many food charities, especially smaller, independent food banks and food emergency provision services. In this regard, it is important to analyse what are the causes and dynamics behind the flow of goods and beyond the shocks, and to what extent a food system which function according to market mechanisms only can be resilient, and which too often put at risk of food insecurities the most marginalised in our society. Moreover, the focus on food poverty from a consumption point of view hides the understanding of more structural problem, i.e. production and distribution, which currently fail to shape a food system that guarantee food justice and food as a right.

A last observation is that local governments have an incentive but also a political interest in supporting local business and local community organisations, for instance to create jobs in their local areas in order to be re-elected. So, there might be a political mismatch between the local interests and the national interests concealed in the national agricultural policies as this supports big multinational corporations in getting cheap labour and cheap inputs through corporate-led global value chains. Sustain (2020) has recently noted that more involvement in community projects and having access to local land<sup>20</sup> and to food production is not *the* long-term solutions but have been identified as one way forward to make social reproduction of local community possible. The crisis of social reproduction in our cities is not due to the pandemic, but rather is the result of a series of long-standing austerity policies which deteriorated the welfare state and basic workers' rights hence put people at the edge of poverty, homelessness, and hunger. Crowded food banks are simply the most immediate and visible signal.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/sep/23/uk-supermarkets-urge-shoppers-not-to-panic-buy-over-lockdown-fears>

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/nov/24/farmland-inequality-is-rising-around-the-world-finds-report?CMP=Share\\_AndroidApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/nov/24/farmland-inequality-is-rising-around-the-world-finds-report?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Other)

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